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Marse Covington

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

By

GEORGE ADE

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

CAPTAIN COVINGTON B. HALLIDAY, *a remnant of the old aristocracy.*
EDDIE BANTREE, *proprietor of the place.*
UNCLE DAN, *a slavery-days negro.*
ARTHUR BIRD, *a regular.*
JAMES H. ROLLER, *a regular.*

SCENE: *At the steel door of a gambling house.*

TIME: *The present.*

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SUGGESTIONS REGARDING CHARACTERS

CAPTAIN HALLIDAY *is middle-aged, of military bearing; may speak with a slight accent, but do not emphasize. He is as proud as Lucifer, dignified, a representative of the old-time Southern chivalry. He wears a frock coat, clean but very much worn, a wide slouch hat and may carry a stick. Suggest the mustache and imperial. He is poverty-stricken to the point of starvation.*

BANTREE *is a flashy, loud and vulgar sport of the bull-neck variety. He wears evening clothes, short coat with a single diamond in the shirt.*

UNCLE DAN *is a well-trained and elderly negro servant; he wears a "dress suit" and may have white gloves. He is a type of the old-time Southern house servant, obsequious, polite, deferential.*

BIRD *is a young swell in evening clothes, coat off, has been drinking, hair mussed, etc. Good chance for character bit.*

ROLLER *is a straight part. Clean-looking young fellow in evening clothes.*

MARSE COVINGTON

The set represents an anteroom or hallway in a gambling house. There need be little furniture other than a hatrack against the wall upstage at R. *of* C. *At* L. *of* C., *against the wall, a telephone. At* L. *there is a doorway, which is supposed to lead to the street. It is heavily barred and has a heavy chain across it so that two or three locks must be unfastened before the door is opened. In the middle of the door is a peek-hole with a wooden slide so that any one inside may look out and see who is demanding admittance. At* R. *is an open doorway which is supposed to lead into the gambling room. Alongside this doorway a sideboard with decanters, glasses, cigars, etc.*

At the rise of the curtain BANTREE *is discovered at the telephone. He has the receiver at his ear and is talking into the 'phone.*

BANTREE. *(In the 'phone)* No. *(Pause.)* No. that's all a bluff. They haven't bothered us for two weeks. We're running along just the same as usual.

(BIRD *enters from* R., *excited.)*

BIRD. Eddie, I want to *see* you a minute.

BANTREE. I'll be right with you, my boy. *(Into 'phone)* All right, Charley. *(Pause, during which* BIRD *pours out drink and gulps it down.* BANTREE

once more into 'phone) Yes—sure thing—send 'em up.

(BIRD *plunges hands into trousers' pockets and feels a bill in one of them. Face expresses surprise. He pulls out bill and looks at it and then exits* R. *hurriedly.)*

BANTREE. *(Resumes talk into 'phone)* Say, Charley, tell 'em to leave the taxi at the corner—don't like to have too many drivin' up. I'm right in between a branch of the Y. M. C. A. and a private residence, and I don't want 'em to begin hollerin'. *(Pause.)* How's *that?* Oh, they can find the place —number seventy-two—the green light. Tell 'em to ask the *policeman*—he's *all right*—nice, reliable fellow. (BIRD *re-enters* R., *having lost his bill.)* Two raps and then a single rap—that's right.

BIRD. Say, Eddie, the man that built that wheel forgot to put on any seventeen. *Of all the rotten luck! (May take another drink if repetition does not seem to be overdoing bus. Or he may grab a cigar out of the box and put it in his mouth for a dry smoke.)*

BANTREE. *(Turning from the 'phone)* Well, you can't ketch 'em *every* time. *(Then into 'phone)* If I hear anything from Latonia I'll let you know. So long. *(Hangs up receiver and turns to* BIRD, *who is pacing up and down.)* Ain't they rollin' right for you?

BIRD. I am certainly trimmed proper, but—*(with determination)*—I'm goin' to stick till these numbers come out. They've *got* to come *sometime.*

BANTREE. Oh, they *all* come out—sooner or later.

BIRD. I may feed in a few markers, but I guess you know me.

BANTREE. Sure, your name is—ah—— *(Hesitating.)*

BIRD. *You* know—*Bird,* of *Pittsburgh.*

BANTREE. *(Chuckling)* Ought to remember that, eh? All the birds come from Pittsburgh.

BIRD. *(Baffled and impatient) Nix*—I didn't come here to be kidded—I want a thousand dollars' worth of yellows—I'm goin' to put that wheel out of business.

BANTREE. *(Affably)* Well, I *guess*—ah——*(Hesitating.)*

BIRD. *(Irritated at his hesitancy)* A thousand isn't a bean to me—I can buy and sell your joint.

BANTREE. No offence, my boy. *(Patting him on the shoulder.)* Gee, but you're excitable! Go right in and draw what you need. I'll be with you in a minute. *(Leading him over* R.*)* Got to call up my wife.

BIRD. *(As he exits* R.*)* If seventeen ever comes—I'll own this place.

(BANTREE *hurries to 'phone and takes down receiver—talks hurriedly.)*

BANTREE. Give me 440—Tenderloin—and hurry up, sister. *(Pause.)* All right, you needn't be my sister, but hurry just the same. *(Pause.)* Hello, is this the Empire Hotel? Give me the office. Hello, is this the office? Is *Tom* there? Oh, *this* is Tom? Say, Tom, this is Eddie Bantree—I'm up here at the factory.—How about young Bird, of Pittsburgh? *(Pause.)* I know he's got it, but would he *welch* if we tapped him for a bundle? *(Pause.)* Huh? *(Pause. A rapping is heard at the door—two raps, pause, and then another.* BANTREE *continues into 'phone)* Yes, he's playing his head off. *(Pause, during which rapping is repeated.)* Much obliged—I guess I'll take a chance on him. *(Hangs up the receiver and goes to the door at* L.*, pushes back slide and looks through.)* Oh! *(In tone of*

annoyance.) Nothin' doin' here. Closed up. *(Pause, during which man outside is supposed to say something.)* I tell you there's nothin' doin'. *Good night. (Pushes back slide angrily and turns.)* That fellow's got a nerve to come around here! *(On this line* UNCLE DAN *enters through door at* R.*)* Say, Dan, while I *think* of it, you've been lettin' a *dead one* in here nearly every night. I've spoken to you about it two or three times. Now, never *again.* He was here just now and I turned him down. It's this *Halliday.*

(UNCLE DAN *stops suddenly and almost drops the coat which he is carrying, and which he has brought out to put on the rack.)*

DAN. Halliday?

BANTREE. Yes, Halliday.

DAN. Captain Covington B. Halliday, of Essex Co't House?

BANTREE. Of the Mills Hotel, *I'd* say. He's getting to be a *pest* around here.

DAN. Why, Misteh Bantree! Cap'n Halliday— *(Stops.)*

BANTREE. Well, what *about* him? He comes in here and never plays a cent. Puts on as much dog as if he owned the place, and two or three times he's touched some of the regulars, and they don't like it. I'm runnin' this place for *gentlemen.*

DAN. Cap'n Halliday, suh, is f'om one of the *fust* families of Virginia. I was bo'n on his fatheh's plantation.

BANTREE. He may have been good forty years ago, but now he's down and out and I won't have him around here. If he comes around again—*throw him out.*

DAN. Throw Marse Covington—out? I—I wouldn' *daih* to.

BANTREE. What's *that?* You're takin' orders from *me*—ain't you?

DAN. *(Meekly)* Yes, suh.

BANTREE. Why, he ain't had enough money for a month to buy his rolls and coffee. He belongs in that line of hand-outs down at Fleischman's Bakery. If I find him in here again—you *go!*

DAN. Yes, suh.

BANTREE. I guess you know when you've got a soft thing. You make more money here in a week than you ever saw in a month before. You want to keep them boys of yours in *school,* don't you?

DAN. Yes, suh, I was hopin' to.

BANTREE. Goin' to make every one of 'em a Booker Washington, eh? Well, they'll turn out to be crap-shooters, the same as the balance.

ROLLER. *(Enters* R. *with wad of bills which he is folding up to put into his pocket)* Talk about your *easy* money—talk about taking stick-candy away from an infant! This is the easiest thing I've struck in a long time!

BANTREE. *(Trying to appear amiable)* What you been doin', Jimmy—puttin' a crimp in us?

ROLLER. That wild man from Pittsburgh shoveled it in at one end and I took part of it out at the other. He spreads 'em so thick you can't see the lay-out!

(DAN *behind, respectfully.)*

BANTREE. Who do you think was here just now? Your old friend, the *Captain.*

ROLLER. *(Who may fill in with business of cigar or cigarette) I* don't know any of the police.

BANTREE. I don't mean the *precinct* captain—*he* couldn't find this place! I mean your *high-toned* friend—Captain *Halliday.*

ROLLER. *Oh!* You mean Captain *Covington B.*

Halliday—(adopting pompous tone). Do you know, I feel sorry for him. My father knew him before the war. He was a great swell in those days. Used to come up here and burn the town.

BANTREE. Well, he is *now* the president of the Down and Out Club. I thought I'd put you on to him in case he wanted to ring in some time. He hasn't got a sou markee and I'd rather not have him around here.

ROLLER. *(Quietly amused)* Oh, I *see*—you are looking for *producers.*

BANTREE. I'm not looking for *has-beens.*

ROLLER. I know—but, Eddie, you must remember that the man who has been somebody or something hates to let go and sink out of sight. Did you ever see a busted horseman who didn't hang around race-tracks? Go down to the Stock Exchange and see the has-been brokers standing out there on the curb—waiting—hoping—for what? I don't know. (DAN, *at sign, begins to assist him with coat.)* A large city is no place for a has-beeen, and yet they seem to stick.

BANTREE. Have a drink before you go?

ROLLER. No, thanks—I've got to hurry and meet some friends. They've been to a show. We're going out to supper.

BANTREE. Well, I guess you'll have enough to pay the check! *(Both laugh.* ROLLER *may look at roll again before putting it in side pocket of coat.)* Drop in again.

ROLLER. I probably will—*(Handing* DAN *a bill)* —if I don't forget the number.

DAN. Thank you, suh! Thank you very much, Mr. Roller! Thank you, suh! *(Going over and releasing chain and bolts on door.)*

ROLLER. Good-night, Eddie.

BANTREE. Good-night, Mr. Roller.

DAN. Call again, suh.

(ROLLER *exits.* DAN *is putting up chain and bars again.)*

BANTREE. You're makin' more money around this joint than *I* am.

BIRD. *(Enters from* R. *He is excited. His hair is rumpled.)* Say, Eddie, are you a lot of pikers around here?

BANTREE. I don't know—mebbe. What's the matter?

BIRD. Every time I order a thousand-dollar stack that lobster with the red hair has a hemorrhage. Can't I go as far as I like? *(To sideboard for a drink.)*

BANTREE. You know it—we'll have the ceiling taken out!

BIRD. I'm goin' to play my system—my way—even if it takes ten thousand at a *crack*—and if that fellow looks hard at me again I'm goin' to *call* him, and call him *hard!*

BANTREE. I'll go in with you—*(Taking him by the arm.)* My boy, you can have all the chips in the world! *(They start* R.*)*

BIRD. I've played here before and I won't stand for anybody gettin' *flossy* with me!

BANTREE. *(As they exit* R.*)* I'll speak to that boy.

(DAN *crosses over and stands near doorway at* R., *looking out into the gambling room.)*

DAN. No, suh, I ain't makin' *all* the money 'at's made heah. Theah he goes again! Look at all of them chips! *(Chuckles.)* That's the on'y way he can *get* 'em is to *buy* 'em! *System! System!* I've seen 'em *come* and I've seen 'em *go,* and the wheel keeps tuhnin' round just the same! *(Rapping is heard at door. Two, pause, then another.* DAN

crosses, chuckling to himself.) Heah comes anotheh system. *(He opens slide and looks out, then closes slide hastily.)* Marse Covington. *(The rapping is repeated.* DAN *opens the slide without showing his face at it.)* No game heah, suh.

HALLIDAY. *(Outside)* Open that door, you black rascal! (DAN *hesitates.)* Open that door! (DAN *begins sliding bolts—lowers the chain. As soon as he begins to cautiously open the door,* HALLIDAY *pushes it open imperiously and stalks into the room.)*

DAN. Why, Marse Covington—it's *you!* It was so dahk outside I couldn' hardly——

HALLIDAY. *(Interrupting)* Where is the person who conducts this establishment? He shall answer to *me!* I come here not to *soil* my hands with the sordid tools of his nefarious trade, but to meet a friend—with whom I am interested in certain large enterprises. I am turned away—told that the place is closed. As I start to go—an acquaintance comes from the house—informs me that the place is *not* closed! Why has this insult been put upon me—*why? (More loudly.)*

DAN. Hsh-h-h! Please, Marse Covington—not so loud!

HALLIDAY. Not so *loud!* Why *not?* How *dare* you correct my manner of speech? Are you getting to be one of these *damned Northern niggers?*

DAN. No, Marse Covington. I never *could* fall as low as *that.* I work in a clubhouse, but——

HALLIDAY. Clubhouse—bah! This fellow is a *clod,* a vulgarian! He waved me airily away from his vile resort—*I, a Halliday—I—— (He starts to cross in front of* DAN *and totters.* DAN *supports him.)*

DAN. Marse Covington—you—you ain't *well!*

HALLIDAY. *(Pulling himself together)* How dare you lay your hands on me? Here, I—I want you to take my card to this fellow—— *(Feeling in his*

pocket.) Tell him I am waiting here for him—*(Still feeling for card)*—that he can either apologize or I'll cane him as I would a hound in the streets. Unfortunately, I have no card with me. You may announce me—*Captain Covington B. Halliday.*

DAN. Yes, suh, I—— Please, Marse Covington, I'd like to say something.

HALLIDAY. *(Very much on his dignity)* When I give an order—that is *final.*

DAN. *(Persistently)* I *must* tell you something, Marse Covington. This Mistah Bantree 'at owns this place is just cheap, common white-trash. He nevah had no family—no mannehs—no nothin'—just a low-down Yankee gambleh.

HALLIDAY. *(Impressed)* A gambler must not insult a Halliday.

DAN. But, Marse Covington—you can't loweh yourself to take hold of such a toad—not even with yo' gloves on. (HALLIDAY *may wear a pair of shabby gloves.)* Don't you 'membah what the old General used to say, "If the little dogs bahk at yo' heels, don't notice 'em."

HALLIDAY. *(Hesitating)* I am not accustomed to receive suggestions from servants, but I thank you, Dan, for what you have told me concerning this —this——

DAN. Bantree, suh—he can just read and write—nevah rode a hoss in his life.

HALLIDAY. I shall not do him the honor of asking an interview—if I meet him on the street I shall kick him into the gutter! *(Again he seems weak, leaning on his cane.* DAN *stands behind him with his hands half extended, but fearing to assist him.)* Open the door. I'll be going.

DAN. Yes, suh. *(He crosses and pulls one bolt—then stops, turns and looks undecided at* HALLIDAY.*)* Marse Covington!

HALLIDAY. Well?

DAN. Evah since I seen you again heah in New York theah's been something on my mind—it beahs down on me—I keep thinkin' of it——

HALLIDAY. I am afraid, Daniel, that I am no longer privileged to bear your burdens or accept your confidence. When my father was your cruel master—— *(Smiling.)*

DAN. Oh, no, Marse Covington!

HALLIDAY. When he used to beat and abuse you.

DAN. *(Laughing)* What you talkin' about, Marse Covington? The sun was always shinin' down at Essex Co't House.

HALLIDAY. At any rate, Mr. Lincoln and his friends made you a free moral agent and you must work out your problems alone. *(Starts toward door.)*

DAN. This ain't no problem—it's just plain *duty*. Do you 'membah, when you was about so high—your Uncle Pitkin come up from New Ohleans?

HALLIDAY. I remember Uncle Pitkin—he was *reconstructed*—at Shiloh.

DAN. Yes, suh. He brought you a five-dollah gold-piece—you laid it on a table in yo' room—— *(Hesitating.)* You—you 'membah it, don't you, Marse Covington?

HALLIDAY. I'm not sure that I do. For a Halliday to possess a sum of money was not unusual in those days.

DAN. I had the run of the house—I come into the room and I seen the sun blinkin' on this little piece of gold, and ev'y time it blink it say, *"Take me—take me!"* and my Sunday-school voice 'way down inside of me say, *"Don't do it—don't do it!" (Chuckling.)* Well, Marse Covington, what chance has a *Sunday-school voice* got with a *nigger?*

HALLIDAY. *(Looking straight ahead—suspicious)* So—you—*took*—it?

DAN. It's been on my mind evah since.

HALLIDAY. If any one else had told me this—I wouldn't have believed it. We always said you were the exception to the rule—*one* honest nigger.

DAN. That's jus' why I felt so mean all these years. *(He is taking money from his pocket.)* That's why I want to give it back to you. *(He is counting out the money. Suggest three one-dollar bills and four halves.)*

HALLIDAY. No—no—Dan! I couldn't take it!

DAN. Can't give you back the gold-piece—spent that mo'n fifty years ago, but heah's some cheap money that fiiggehs up just the same.

HALLIDAY. *(Affected—walking up close to him)* Look here, you old reprobate! *(Laying his hand tenderly on* DAN'S *sleeve.)* I don't believe a word of this.

DAN. Why, Marse Covington! I've owned up to bein' a thief and now you think I'm *lyin'*. I *must* be changin' to a Northern niggeh, suah enough.

HALLIDAY. If there ever *was* a debt—it has been outlawed.

DAN. *(Holding money out) Please* take it, suh!

HALLIDAY. Put it in your pocket—call it a *present* to an old family servant.

DAN. My Sunday-school voice won't nevah say *"Amen"* until I give back that money! Heah! I'll just put it in yo' pocket. (DAN *folds the bills and the silver and pushes the money into* HALLIDAY'S *vest pocket.* HALLIDAY *looks straight ahead, neither resisting nor assisting. Pause.)*

HALLIDAY. Daniel.

DAN. Yes, suh.

HALLIDAY. I have on hand several large projects of a gold-mining character. Should my expectations be realized, I hope to have an establishment of my own here in New York.

DAN. Yes, suh.

HALLIDAY. Nothing showy. I leave the gilt and

the purple to the parvenues—a quiet, comfortable home-place something like Essex Court House.

DAN. No othah place *could* be like that!

HALLIDAY. When I am settled here I hope to take you away from this wretched place and make you my body-servant.

DAN. Yes, suh.

HALLIDAY. There will be *other* servants.

DAN. Yes, suh.

HALLIDAY. This is no place for one who has worn the livery of a Halliday.

DAN. No, suh.

HALLIDAY. I'll bid you good-night, Daniel. (DAN *is opening door.)* If you wish to see me about that position, I'll be standing in front of the Astor House any pleasant day. (DAN *opens the door.)*

DAN. Yes, suh.

HALLIDAY. Good-night.

DAN. *(Closing the door)* Good-night, suh. *(Door closed—business with chains.* DAN *stands leaning against it. May try first curtain here. He looks out.)* He's goin' to get somethin' to eat. Oh, *Marse Covington, Marse Covington!*

BANTREE. *(Enters* R. *and stands near doorway)* Didn't I see Halliday in here just now?

DAN. He got in mos' befo' I knew it.

BANTREE. Well?

DAN. I threw him *out.*

BANTREE. Good! *(Exits* R.*)*

DAN. *(Sinking down, sobbing)* Yes, suh, *I threw him out! I threw him out!*

CURTAIN

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